

**Testimony of  
Peter D. Lopez, Regional Administrator  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 2  
Before the  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Environment  
  
November 14, 2017**

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and fellow Energy and Commerce Committee members, I am Pete Lopez, Regional Administrator for EPA's Region 2, which covers New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and eight federally-recognized Indian Nations. Thank you for the privilege of joining you today for this important conversation. My testimony today is a snapshot of EPA Region 2's response phase to hurricanes Irma and Maria.

**EXPERIENCE WITH IRENE AND LEE:**

In my years of experience as a New York State Legislator, I was intensely involved in a response to a very similar situation to Irma and Maria. In 2011, upstate NY was hit by Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. Here, my parents and family members were left homeless and 6 out of 7 of my counties were placed in states of emergency. My region faced similar devastation and had similar geographical features and similar socioeconomic conditions. Throughout my experience with Irene and Lee, I developed an understanding of how complicated it can be for areas to recover, and I learned that the more disadvantaged the community, the slower and more painful the recovery.

## **IRMA, MARIA AND THE CARIBBEAN:**

Let me turn to EPA's effort in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. I traveled to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands the week of October 16. I was, of course, struck by the incredible destruction in the wake of the hurricanes, but I was also immensely impressed with the resilience of the people. The focus of my trip was not to simply observe EPA's work, but also to strengthen relationships with Commonwealth, Territory and local officials and find solutions to pressing local problems. The experience was both sobering and galvanizing. I saw the incredible needs, and witnessed the urgency with which EPA and our other partners are working to meet these challenges.

EPA Region 2 has about 320 employees and contractors involved in the response, with about 235 on the ground in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The following is the status report as of November 8, 2017, resulting from our work with the governments of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, as well as with our many federal partners:

- In Puerto Rico, 19 of 115 drinking water plants are out of service.
- EPA has helped assess all 237 independent smaller rural community drinking water systems not operated by PRASA. Where systems need repair, the EPA is working with FEMA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and local NGOs to help get the needed repairs, and in some cases to install solar power to these systems.
- In the U.S. Virgin Islands, EPA has taken nearly 1000 drinking water samples. This information is being used to determine where disinfection of systems is needed. EPA is offering assistance to VI officials to support follow up visits to those sites that have been impacted.

- We have completed about 320 assessments of facilities covered by hazardous waste, risk management, and spill prevention regulations in Puerto Rico and 74 in the Virgin Islands. While there was damage at some of these facilities, there were no major releases or spills reported.
- EPA has assessed all 35 Superfund and oil sites and has not found major spills or releases, though some sites do have damage.
- EPA is working with local jurisdictions and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to collect hazardous debris – household hazardous waste, white goods (i.e., heavy consumer durables such as for example, air conditioners, refrigerators, and stoves) and electronics. We are also coordinating with Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to handle other, often comingled debris. Where vegetative debris is concerned, we are working to support composting efforts and will be providing fine particle monitoring where local and state officials choose to burn woody debris using special devices.
- EPA is working closely with the U.S. Coast Guard as they deal with the approximately 726 sunken vessels and the resulting debris and widespread small oil spills.
- EPA has conducted about [REDACTED] wastewater treatment assessments, including plants, pump stations and trunk lines.
- In Puerto Rico, 4 of the 51 wastewater treatment plants operated by PRASA are out of service. Of the 800 pump stations in Puerto Rico, about 124 are overflowing sewage due to lack of power, malfunctioning generators or damage.

- Many of the USVI wastewater plants on St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John are operating, though some plants and pump stations are damaged or blocked by storm debris.

## **CHALLENGES:**

We have much work ahead of us, and face a number of serious challenges in addition to the overarching concern of providing electricity across Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands:

- Many roads are still impassable and there are dangerous mud and rock slides in mountainous regions.
- There is a need for ongoing humanitarian aid. In some cases, EPA has stepped out of its traditional role, coordinating closely with FEMA to bring water, food and supplies to more remote areas where we are conducting assessments and where our responders have been the first to arrive.
- Initially, travel and lodging limitations impacted our ability to accommodate responders on the islands. These limitations are now subsiding.
- We continue to work with FEMA to transport heavy equipment to Puerto Rico via barge.

## **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE:**

EPA continues to actively and thoughtfully respond to the devastation of Maria and Irma. As required, we will participate in the Federal government's after-action report and include a detailed description of strategies for more effectively responding to future storm events.

One critical lesson learned so far is that there are unique challenges for both emergency response and future hazard mitigation on the Caribbean islands. For example, there were not enough generators available on the islands to provide back-up electrical power needed for essential services such as drinking water, hospitals, labs, and wastewater collection and treatment. In Puerto Rico this resulted in much of the population losing access to safe drinking water, widespread sewer overflows that contaminated surface waters and posed risks to the health of people who were drinking from or bathing in surface waters i.e., streams, rivers, lakes, and reservoirs.

I am extremely proud of the work that EPA is doing in response to all three hurricanes, but I am also mindful that there are always opportunities for improvement. We look forward to working with Congress and our federal and local partners to explore how our agency can more effectively respond during and following natural disasters. These collaborative efforts will enable all of us to better safeguard the health and safety of the public while protecting our natural resources to the best of our ability. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to any questions the committee might have on EPA's important role in emergency response and recovery efforts.